

# OUR SHORT STORY "The Letter 'H'."

tions I ever encountered was that which possessed the mind of a worthy master builder named Drabble. Drabble had amassed a considerable for-tune by jerry-building, which he had carried to the point of a fine art. He was the sole inventor of several altogether nefarious processes by which an appearance of delusive sta-bility could be imparted to buildings that really were held together by no more cohersive force than the paper on the walls. He had degraded whole districts in the immediate vicinity of London by the erection of houses at once so filmsy and so ugly that no one could have been surprised had the wind whisked them bodily away, and wind whisked them bodily away, and no man of decent principles could have regretted their loss. He spent the greater part of his time in a gloomy little office in the Gray's Inn road, where he matured his schemes of destruction and raked together. struction, and raked together a considerable fortune. At night he retired to the sectusion of a brand new villa at Highgate, the chief ornaments of which were a full-length portrait of himself, executed by a sign-painter with the aspirations of an artist, and an enormous tea-urn of solid silver,

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which was an object of awe and covet-ing among all his poor relations. Drabble had a friend named Scutt, a lean and hungry-looking person who was notorious as the most fractious vestryman in the parish. Drabble was unmarried, and therefore was thrown much into the society of Scutt, who twice a week took tea with him, in a spirit of furtive admiration of the teaurn. Soutt was a Radical of the violent order, but the magnitude of the tea-urn soon worked havor with his principles, and although he had the greatest contempt for Drabble's intellect and general political ineptitude, he was unable to avoid a cringing adulation toward the possessor of so much solid competence. In an evil moment Scutt aroused the political ambitions of his friend. Drabble discovered that he had political ideas, which, singularly enough, coincided completely with those of the daily paper which he read diligently in his the room, fingered nervously the huge evening lessure. These ideas he be-lieved to be strictly original, and he would recite whole passages of the leader which he had read the night previous, in the form of his own con-viction that they were the fruit of his own unaided cerebration. Very soon he came to have dreams of a constituency that should welcome him with loyal ardor, and of a parliamentary career that should be of great importance to the nation. Scutt encouraged him in these preposterous ambitions, seeing for himself a new source of revenue as Drabble's political agent.

There was one great difficulty in the way, however: Drabble found that he the letter H were at deadly odds. At the first meeting which he addressed, he remarked that he "was 'appy to say 'e was no himperialist," whereupon a gentleman at the back of the hall asked him politely if he had dropped anything, which was disconcerting and deterrent to further eloquence. In vain he practiced fantastias on the English language every morning before glass; no sooner did the fatal letter appear in sight than he fled. He toiled through the intricacles of his native tongue with a sweating brow, but the thing pursued him with a tireless malignity revolting to the human mind. It was ridiculous and incredible that a single tricksy letter should ruin a career, but so it was, and the knowledge weighed upon his heart like lead. At length he resorted to subterfuge in order to avoid his enemy. He had been accustomed to call jovially to a

"Ow do you do?"

would say with an air of polite effort.

"And are you well?" He picked and

\*\*\* One of the most curious hallucina- ] shied at vowel beginnings, like a nervous horse. He put himself to incredible pains to discover synonyms for common expressions, "What's the price?" taking the place of a curt, "Ow much?" and so forth. He dodged his way amid familiar phrases, wary as a hunted deer; ran from an aspirate as from an assegai, yet all to no purpose, for he continually came to grief.

"It's no use, Scutt," he said mournfully; "it's 'ereditary."
"What do you mean by that?" said the sympathetic Scutt.

"I mean it's my tongue. Sort o' disease. Some folks is born 'ealthy, and some isn't; some's born to speak right, and others can't to save their lives. I'm one o' those as can't."

"Nonsense, said Scutt. "Doctors can cure most things nowadays. There's a deaf and dumb child next deep to me they've taught to sneak

door to me they've taught to speak. If you go to a first-rate doctor he'll soon put you right. P'raps you're tongue-tied, you know."

Scutt's suggestion fell upon a mind prepared. The more Drabble thought over it, the clearer became his conviction that he was the victim of some congenital defect. Some people never had the least difficulty with the fatal letter. It came as easy as breathing. Others, like himself, labored under an obstinate disability. No doubt a slight operation on the tongue would put everyhting right. Even Scutt, who certainly had no more than two 'undred a year, could speak correctly, and it was absurd that he should be eclipsed by Scutt. He would see a doctor. This hopeful resolve brought Drabble to my door. He entered my con-sulting room with an anxious and furtive air, which sat curiously upon one whose outward appearance was unde-nlably pompous. He was a man a little over middle height, stout and well fleshed. His face was long and serious, but not unpleasing; he wore gray side whiskers of the detestable variety "Dundreary;" once known as mouth was the straight firm mouth of a person destitute of humor; his gold cable that hung from his waistcoat pocket, and for several minutes said not a word. To my questions he merely shook his head. I began to think I had never met a person stricken by such an absolute destitution of

"Well, Mr. Drabble," I said at ength, "I have asked you several length. questions to which you have not replied. I must remind you that my time is precious. You appear to be in perfect health. Will you be good enough to tell me in a few words what you wished to consult me about?"
"It's a secret disease," he said sol-"A 'ereditary defeck, so to emnly.

"A what?" "Defeck. What's born with you. Ereditary, you know. There, I can see you've recognized it at a glance. I began to be suspicious of the sanity of my visitor.

"I can perceive no hereditary defect," I replied. "What do you mean?" "Ah," he said, with a deep sigh, "you said it all right. Scutt says it all right. Scutt's a friend o' mine, you know. Most people can say it all right. But I can't, not though I practice it a thousand times, which I've

done before coming here."
"Mr. Drabble," I said, with some irritation, "we are playing at cross-pur-poses. I don't in the least know what you mean. You must speak more plainly, if I am to be of service to

you."
"I spoke plainly enough. A 'e-red-i"Is spoke plainly enough. "Is that tary de-feck," he shouted. plain enough for you?"
"You need not shout," I replied.

hear you quite plainly talking of some hereditary defect, but you have not toll me what it is."

"Ah, now, if I could only say it like that," he said whistfully. "What a gift it is!"

A clear case of insanity, I thought. The man's a lunatic at large. And with a view to humoring him, I said suavely. "Ah, now I see. An hereditary defect, you say. Why, bless me, that's common enough and is often quite easily remedied."

"It it?" he said eagerly. "Now that's what I wanted to 'ear. It's a little operation I want done, an' I'm prepared to pay well for it. There's something wrong with my tongue, and you're the man to put it right."

"Yes, certainly," I said, still bent upon humoring him. I had once known as case of monomania in which the patient believed that his tongue

the patient believed that his tongue was three times its natural size, and that it was impossible to close the mouth. Perhaps this was a similar

case. "Suppose we examine your tongue," I suggested.

He submitted to the examination with great meekness. The examina-tion enabled me to observe him more closely. I was especially attracted by his eyes. They were blue and mild, as I have said, but restless, with a spark of fire quivering uneasily in them, like a star in the depth of a well. Out of such a tiny spark madness is often born. Beneath the phlegmatic, almost bovine, exterior of the man, it was clear that some curious tension

was going on. "You don't observe much the mater?" he asked.
"Not much," I said; "but it would help me if you would describe your

Well, it's this way." he said, with the deliberate gesture of a man with a long story to unfold. "I'm a man of hideas, sir, but I'm 'indered in life by not bein' able to get my words right. It's all the letter H, doctor. The tricks that letter plays, no man can know as 'asn't followed them as I 'ave." I nodded sympathetically. "It's always appening where it isn't hexpected, and isn't wanted, and fairly gives a man's brains a twist hupsides with it. Look at the word honor" (he aspirated it), there's the H right enough, but it musn't be known to be there. Look at the word 'umble, there's a H there, too, and just in the same place, and if you leave it out folk laught at you. Doctor, I've practised those words, an' lots o' hothers, till I fell like going crazy. Scutt says to me-Scutt's my friend, you know-'If you don't think so much about it, you'll do it all right by hinstinct.' Well, Scutt 'as hinstinct, 'an I ain't, 'an whether I think or don't think, it's much the same thing. Scutt says to me, 'You should heddicate yourself in private. That's what Gladstone and John Burns an' lots o' hothers, till I feel like going I've done it, two hours before breakfast every morning the last six month, but it's one thing to heddicate your brain and another to make your tongue do what it ought to do. Then Scutt says, says he, 'You go to a doc-It's a 'ereditary defeck, that's what it is. Anyone might ha' had it. Shakespeare or Gladstone, or any o' the great o' the earth. P'raps they 'ave it when they was young. Well, they got over it one way or t'other, an' so can you. You go up to a doctor an' show 'im your tongue, an' ten chances to one 'e'll cure you.' That seemed sense, anyway. Scutt 'asn't much money, but 'e's a lot o' sense, as' Scutt, an' is great at public meetings. An' so, doctor, what I want is that you will do what's needed to my that you will do what's needed to my and partly by real sympathy, soon fell tongue, so as I can get that plaguey into her place of elderly Desdemona, letter light, like other folk, an' if you can do it I'll not only pay you well, but I'll be eternally grateful to you." I could have laughed outright in the man's face, and I wonder that I didn't As it was. I controlled myself enough to say in a choking voice, "And is that

"Well, there's one other thing. Scutt said something about it being likely I was tongue-tied; but it would be impertinent to make suggestions of that nature to you. An' there's another thing as I 'aven't mentioned to a soul." His manner became suddenly humble and almost bashful. "I'm a bachelor, but not by choice. I'd like to marry an' 'ave a child or two in the ouse, but believe me, Doctor, the one thing as prvents me is this dreadful infirmity o' mine. I know well enough what 'ud 'appen if I tried talking to a woman about love. I'd be sure to get my aitches wrong, and then sh'd laugh at me. There was a woman once," and he blushed, "a woman as did that same thing to me. She didn't know 'ow it 'urt me, or she wouldn't ave done it, for she was a kind woman by nature, an' one as I could 'ave loved. But she made me afraid to try agen, for there's nothing crueller than the laughter o' women; an' often I've seen a look on their faces, just a little sort o' smile, by which I've known that they laughed at me in their hearts. Why, I've seen even a little servantwench snigger be'ind 'er' and at some-thing I've said, an' it's real 'ard to bear, Doctor, real 'ard."

There was something so sincere and heartfelt in this last speech that the sense of absurdity in the situation was quite obliterated. But what was I to

do with my strange patient? It was plain that he was on the verge of monomania, if not already in its grip. Men had glided down the slope of madmen had gided down the slope of mad-ness on a less propulsion, had hung poised for a time, until some slight cause, some inward chafing of rage more acute than usual, had worn the threads of reason through, and had precipitated them into the abyss. It would have been easy to tell him that his request was foolish and impossible, but who could predict the result of but who could predict the result of such a verdict on a mind so excitable? It seemed the kindest course to go on humoring him, and as he plainly needed some nerve sedative I gave him a prescription, and told him to come again in a week. "We will try medicine first," I said evasively, and he went away a good deal comforted.

A few days later who should call upon me but the author of all the mis-

chief, the preposterous ass called Scutt. He was obviously a person of great ignorance and equal vanity; besides which there was about him a peculiarly offensive servility of man-ner. However, he explained his business with tolerable clearness. He reported that Drabble appeared to be very strange in his manner. He had not been to the office since the day he saw me. He had caught a chill, he believed; anyway, he had taken to his bed. Pressed to explain what he meant by "strange in his manner," Scutt replied that Drabble had taken a large dictionary to be bed with him, and appeared to pass his time in reading it aloud. The servants reported that these extraordinary readings went

on far into the night; they did not know what to make of them, and were seriously alarmed. That afternoon I called on Drabble. It was towards dusk when I reached the brand-new villa at Highgate. I found the servants huddled together at the foot of the stairs in a high state

of nervous excitement. The gas was not lit upon the staircase, and in the dim space above I could hear the voice of Drabble monotonously reciting a string of words, for all the world like the drone of a board school on a hot afternoon. "We're afraid to go up to the master," said the housemaid, with a shiver. "He's been going on like that for days, and all hours of the night, too." And while it was my duty to represent this duty to repress with all sternness this hysteric panic among the servants, yet I was bound to confess that there was

something eerie in the long drone of that voice, with its senseless reiterations, especially in the dimness of that unlighted house. Of course I went up to Drabble. There could be very little doubt about his condition. That spark of fire in the depths of his mild blue eyes had

become bigger and intenser. He laughed boisterously when he saw me, and remarked that he was getting on famously. He was not in a condition that justified forcible restraint. but obviously he needed careful watching. Now it happened that I had occasionally employed a certain widow named Mrs. Bardsley in cases of simple nursing. She was not a certificated nurse; she was, in fact, a person of no education; but she was possessed of much firmness and common sense. and knew how to regulate a house as well as attend to a patient. By night-

fall Mrs. Bardsley was established at Victoria Villa, much to the content of its unfortunate master. And now comes the most curiousone might say the most farcial-part of the whole story. Drabble related all his griefs to Mrs. Bardsley, and she impelled partly by natural astuteness, She agreed that it was a terrible thing to be persecuted by the malignity of a single iniquitous letter; she remarked casually that she herself had had a similar trouble. But what was aitch more or less if your 'eart was in the right place? It was a mean sort of nature that saw in a mere fault of grammar an unsurmountable barrier to respect and love—yes, love. There might be women that felt that way— 'eartless women; but, thank God, she was built upon a different principle. It was more than an aitch that would turn her mind away from a man that she genuinely respected—yes, loved. As for hignorant people that shouted out questions from the back of public alls-who were they? They should be put in prison till they learned better manners. It wasn't for gentlemen o' brains and cleverness to take any note o' the like o' them. And so with many words she comforted the afflicted Drabble, and he ceased to think of his 'Ereditary Defeck." In fact, it had ceased to appear to him as a defect,

for the honeyed words of the aitchless Mrs. Bardsley had effectually rupted his judgment. The faithful Scutt now assumed the shape of a tormentor and a bore; and on his venturing (on the spur of private interest) to warn Drabble against the cajoleries of Mrs. Bardsley, he was driven from the house before a storm of unaspirated eloquence. The same evening, I have reason to believe, Drabble offered his 'eart to the sympathetic Bardsley, who accepted the gift with blushing promptitude, and communicated the intelligence to Scutt by the midnight post.

Scutt gnashed his teeth at the news

for he saw himself henceforth exiled

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from the grandeurs of Victoria Villa. He spent several weeks in trying to work up cutting phrases and bitter sarcasms; but he got no further than to get it whispered round the vestry that Drabble and Mrs. Bardlsey had married upon the basis of a mutual aitchlessness. I attended the wedding reception, and when I observed the pompous self-satisfaction of Drabble and compared it with the hunted misery I had once seen on his face. could not but congratulate myself that I had unwittingly hit upon the best cure for his melancholia. There had been a little operation on his tongue after all: but he had conducted himself with singular success when the said to Mrs. Bardsley, as I know he must have done, "Will you 'ave me, and share my 'eart and 'ome?"—The British Weekly.

### The Duel.

Oh, many a duel the world has seen That was bitter with hate, that was red with gore, But I sing of the duel by far more

cruel Than ever by poet was sung before.

It was waged by night, yea by day and by night,

With never a pause or halt or rest, And the curious spot where this batwas fought Was the throbbing heart in a woman's breast.

There met two rivals in deadly strife, And they fought for this woman so pale and proud, One was a man in the prime of life,

And one was a corpse in a moldy shroud: wrapped in a sheet from his head to his feet,

The other one clothed in worldly fashion. But a rival to dread is a man who is If he has been loved in his life with passion.

The living lover he battled with sighs, He strove for the woman with words While stiff and stark lay the corpse in

And silently yearned and yearned and yearned. One spoke of the rapture that life still

For hearts that yielded to love's desire, And one through the cold grave's earthy mold

Sent thoughts of a past that were fraught with fire. The living lover seized hold of her

"You are mine," he cried, "and we will not part!' But she felt the clutch of the dead man's touch On the tense drawn strings of her aching heart.

Yet the touch was of ice, and she shrank with fear-Oh, the hands of the dead are cold, so cold-

And warm was the arms that waited near To gather her close in their clinging

And warm was the light in the living But the eyes of the dead, how they stare and stare! With sudden surrender she turned to

And passionate lover who wooed her there. Farewell to sorrow, hall, sweet tomorrow! The battle was over, the duel was

They swooned in the blisses of love's fond kisses, And the dead man stared on in the dark alone.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox in New York

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The Maritime Express from Halifax, St. John and other points east, will arrive at Montreal daily except on Monday, at 5:30 p.m.

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